

Social Inquiry and Social Action

Priorities for Preparing School Leaders

TREVOR GALE

Australian National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education

Schools are uniquely placed in democracies. Among other things, they are sites of learning about things democratic, including learning *through* as one (important) way of learning *about*. There are other sites in which to learn about and through democracies but schooling's uniqueness is that it is a site through which all must pass. So positioned, schools also provide models of democracy for other sites. They are formative of bodies: of young hearts and minds, and of what those hearts and minds (will) make of institutions. And yet, in democratic terms, the universal imposition of schooling on the young can be seen as its greatest shortcoming. There is much to learn about the enactment of democracy through compulsory school attendance, as there is from compulsory voting (which is less widespread). This is democracy's greatest conundrum: the legitimacy of imposing an ideal when the ideal is self-determination, albeit determined in collectives.

Leaders are strategically positioned in schools. They are positioned as leaders *of* schools while some are also leaders *in* schools. For the most part, they do not come to their position through some democratic process even though some adopt a democratic stance. In this respect, they are democracy's instruments. They have a moral contract with society, not just with those in their school, to be leaders of learning about and through democracy. They have a responsibility to produce the citizens that democracies need and desire in a context of what is possible, and to balance this with the needs and desires of their students, also in relation to what is possible. They can carry the official title of leader—of principal or head teacher—or they may go by other names (e.g., deputy principal and even teacher, teaching assistant, school counselor, etc.). They have a sense of where they are going and carry others with them, which defines their leadership.

For those who would be school leader—particularly of and in schools in democratic societies—and for those who would educate them, there are two major priorities that should guide their preparation, which arise from this view of schooling and the positioning of its leaders.

Priority 1: Cultivate a ‘researcherly’ disposition: educate leaders for social inquiry

To be a leader of schools is to be a student of society. Against the backdrop of what has been, school leaders need to be able to read the contemporary sociopolitical and economic times and make sense of these, for themselves and for those in their schools and communities. They need to be able to translate the macro into the micro, to infer what the ‘big picture’ means for their students and schools and which strategies in this context will contribute to democratic ends. They need to be able to do this reading for themselves or at least be able to critique the readings provided by others. And they need to stay up-to-date with their reading. Circumstances change, quickly and often in times of ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 2000). One reading, however astute, will not suffice across time and place.

School leaders also need to be researchers, specifically of local knowledge and circumstance. They need to be producers of knowledge about their particular locales and to encourage and enable the production of local knowledge by others (teachers, students, parents, etc.) in those locales. It is not always enough to have a “researcherly disposition” (Lingard & Gale, 2009), although having “an openness . . . to ‘findings’, understanding and enlightenment to be derived from a critical reading of educational research” (p. 8) is an important starting point. Leaders cannot know what the macro means for the micro unless the micro is known. More importantly, understandings of the local provide opportunities to champion its value within the related projects of education and democracy, and provide the wherewithal to speak back to grand narratives (often espoused in policy, for example).

It is in the interplay between these ‘public issues’ and ‘private troubles’ (Mills, 1959) that leaders are able to create spaces for democracy within the constraints of their particular circumstances.

Priority 2: Cultivate a ‘teacherly’ disposition: educate leaders for social action

School leaders, then, also need to understand how to enact democratic practices in these spaces. They need to know how to work *with* teachers, students, parents, and communities, in legitimate partnerships, rather than simply act *on* them. They need to be able to unsettle deficit views, to position their constituents as intelligent and capable, not just within school communities but outside them as well. This will require broadening understandings of what counts as

worthwhile and legitimate knowledge and skills in schools. It will also require creating opportunities for learning that involve high intellectual challenge, high-motivation projects and events, and high expectations of producing high quality products (artifacts of learning). This is particularly important for schools and students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Having a ‘teacherly’ disposition also extends beyond the boundaries of school. School leaders who take seriously their own positioning and the unique role of schooling in democracy, need to know how to build capacity in their communities and to develop cultures of possibility. This includes, but is not limited to, encouraging and enabling teacher professional learning through participatory action research methodologies. It also involves developing school–community partnerships through which schools make contributions to their communities, contributions that are negotiated with these communities and which are valued by them. School leaders also need to know how to involve their communities in the life of the school, not just in the mundane (making school lunches, gardening, repairing play equipment, etc.) but also in the core business of schooling: in its decision making and the development of curriculum materials.

Education for social inquiry and social action: These are the priorities that should guide the preparation of school leaders in democratic societies.

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About the Author

Professor Trevor Gale is the founding director of Australia’s National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. In 2005, he was president of the Australian Association for Research in Education. A sociologist of education, he has taught courses in the sociology of teaching, policy sociology, and qualitative research methodology and has been researching education policy and social justice in education for two decades. He is author and co-author of five books and over 100 book chapters, journal articles, and conference papers. His books include: *Just Schooling* (OUP 2000) with Kathleen Densmore, *Engaging Teachers* (OUP 2003; translated into Spanish in 2007) with Kathleen Densmore, *Rough Justice* (Peter Lang, 2005), *Educational Research by Association* (Sense, 2010) with Bob Lingard, and *Schooling in Disadvantaged Communities* (Springer, 2010) with Carmen Mills. He may be reached via e-mail at: Trevor.Gale@unisa.edu.au